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Duncan McDuie-Ra¹

Abstract

Violence against women (VAW) in India is commonly attributed to an overarching metacultural patriarchal framework. Focusing on this national culture of violence obscures the experiences of VAW among ethnic minority women. This article focuses on VAW in Northeast India, a region populated by large numbers of Scheduled Tribes with different cultural norms, and where society has become militarized by ongoing insurgency and counterinsurgency. Though tempting, militarization alone is not a sufficient explanation for VAW; instead, this article focuses on the interplay between nonfamilial and familial contexts in creating a “frontier culture of violence” in which VAW is experienced and contested.

Keywords

borderlands, militarization, Northeast India, tribal women, violence against women

Introduction

Violence against women (VAW) in India has been analyzed through a range of disciplines and in a range of different sociocultural spaces. The relationship between these spaces is mostly hierarchical. Studies focusing on localized manifestations of VAW are related back to an overarching metacultural patriarchal framework. In other words, VAW in India may have local manifestations, but these are variations of a national patriarchy reproduced by a singularized “Indian culture.” Despite recognition of rapid changes in

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“Indian culture” the patriarchal elements remain stubborn. Although this may offer some useful insights into the persistence of VAW in India, this framework is limited in analyzing the experiences of VAW among women from ethnic minority groups within India, particularly those living in very different cultural, social, economic, and political contexts. This article is concerned with VAW in the Northeast states of India, particularly in the so-called hill states occupying the eastern frontier of India. The Northeast poses a complex conundrum. Most of the factors used to explain the causes of VAW in other parts of India, such as rigid religious norms, dowry, dependency in marriage, and caste-based inequality, do not apply to the majority of women in the Northeast. Most of the factors identified as reducing the risks of VAW, such as high female education and literacy rates, paid employment, and autonomous decision making, are prevalent. Yet levels of VAW are very high, among the highest in India when spousal and nonspousal violence are included.

This article contends that essentialist notions of gender oppression are inadequate in understanding the realities in the Northeast frontier. An intersectional framework is adopted to illuminate the ways in which patriarchies are intertwined with militarization, and the categories of race, ethnicity, tribe, exceptionalism, and suspect populations to produce a “frontier culture of violence.” This is explored through three stages reflecting the three components of the overall argument. The first stage establishes the components of the “national culture of violence” discussed in literature on VAW in India by reviewing the most frequently occurring explanations for VAW in India: religious norms, dowry, dependency in marriage, and caste-based inequality. These factors are largely absent from society in the Northeast, yet levels of VAW are high, inviting a closer analysis of the contexts within which VAW is experienced, termed here the *frontier culture of violence*. The second stage examines the frontier culture of violence by focusing on the external nonfamilial context and the internal familial context in which VAW takes place. The external nonfamilial context of VAW emanates from the occupation of the region by the Indian Armed Forces and the proliferation of militant groups causing direct and indirect VAW. While tempting to attribute familial VAW solely to the militarization of society in the Northeast, this article eschews a simple causal link and focuses instead on the interplay between the external and internal contexts, allowing for degrees of influence between the two and also for the influence of other factors. The third stage shifts from the experience of VAW to its contestation by women’s movements in the region. It is argued that the external nonfamilial context of VAW is able to be contested with less difficulty than the internal familial context. Contestation of VAW perpetrated by the armed forces converges with a broader discourse in civil society, whereas contestation of VAW within the household and among members of ethnic minority communities is more difficult to contest and gains far less popular support. The article concludes by discussing the need to look beyond national cultures of violence to analyze the particular configurations of factors in frontier and border areas that enact and enable VAW.

This research is the result of fieldwork in Northeast India in 2005, 2008, and 2009. During these visits interviews, informal discussions, and observations of women’s organizations and movements allowed a picture of VAW and its contestation to emerge.

Although primary interview data have helped shape the material in this article, the sensitive nature of the material has prevented the direct quotation of respondents; instead, it draws on secondary data available through national and state government reports, publications by women's organizations, human rights organizations, and existing literature. This article uses the concept of intersectionality to focus on the ways different categories of gender, race, ethnicity, tribe, exceptionalism, and suspect populations converge in the context of the militarized Northeast. The origin of the term *intersectionality* is traced to Crenshaw (1991), who saw the concept as a way to complicate the tendency of identity politics to ignore and homogenize intragroup difference. Crenshaw found this particularly problematic when analyzing VAW, which she argued was "often shaped by other dimensions of . . . identities, such as race and class," not only does this obscure the causes and experiences of VAW but also it makes the politicization of violence more difficult (p. 1242). Initially, the concept was used to examine the intersections of race, class, and gender, and generate a feminist praxis to challenge oppressive structures faced by women, particularly Black women in the United States (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). In recent years, the concept has broadened to account for the intersection of "multiple axes of differentiation" (Brah & Phoenix, 2004, p. 76), which can create "hierarchies of differential access to a variety of resources—economic, political and cultural" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 199). It is important to identify the conflation between intersecting categories and their relational dynamics. As McClintock (1995) argues in the context of empire building, "race, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other; nor can they be simply yoked together retrospectively like armatures of Lego . . . they come into existence *in and through* each other—if in contradictory and conflictual ways" (p. 5).

In this article, intersectionality is used as a method of inquiry into the ways VAW is experienced, accepted publically and privately, and politicized in Northeast India. I argue that the intersection of "axes of differentiation" is particular to this region and creates conditions that are not experienced in other parts of India, though frequently the experiences of other parts of India are used to *understand* the Northeast. Although this may seem to be a logical application of intersectionality, often in the literature race is conceptualized in broad categories such as South Asian or Indian, or in religious/cultural categories such as "Indian Hindu." This ignores the ways race operates for members of ethnic minorities, whose social positioning is relational to dominant ethnic groups and other minority communities in their own localized context, as will be evident below.

This article will use the term *Northeast* to refer to all eight states of the Northeast region of India, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Asom, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. At certain points, the descriptor "hill states" will be used to refer only to the five states with majority "tribal" populations.¹ The term *tribal* refers to ethnic groups designated as Scheduled Tribes in the Indian Constitution. In the Northeast, most of these groups trace their ethnic lineage to Tibeto-Burman and Mon-Khmer people in Southeast Asia and Tibet, marking a distinct cultural difference to the myriad of people in other parts of India. The term *tribal* will be used in this

article to designate these ethnic groups as it is the term commonly used in India and internalized by most of the people subject to the term. The term *ethno-nationalism* will be used to denote the political and social discourses that dominate the region. Ethno-nationalism captures the essence of the full range of collective agency that has characterized the region in the last five decades, virtually all based on the political accommodation of ethnic and tribal differences. The concept of the Indian “mainland” is common in the Northeast to refer to the rest of India and accentuate the cultural, political, and social differences between the Northeast frontier and the Indian heartland. While classifying the Indian mainland in the singular overlooks major cultural differences within, particularly between south India and Gangetic north India,² it better reflects the core separation between the Northeast and the mainland. This will be explained further in the following section.

The National Culture of Violence

Data on VAW in India vary according to the different scales, methods, and definitions adopted in collecting the data. This can result in very different results. For example, the *National Family and Health Survey*, the primary source of comprehensive data on VAW in India produced by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MHFW), changed the way it defines VAW between its 2002 survey and its 2009 survey (MHFW, 2009, p. 467). In 2002, women were asked if they were “beaten or physically mistreated since the age of 15” and, if so, they were asked about the perpetrator (MHFW, 2002, p. 74). This did not limit results to familial violence only. In 2009, the definition of violence was expanded to include “emotional violence,” “sexual violence,” and “physical violence” (MHFW, 2009, pp. 494–495), yet the spatial context was limited to familial violence defined as “violence by spouses as well as by other household members” (MHFW, 2009, p. 494). The overall findings are thus very discordant; the national average for the 2002 survey showed 21.0% of women in India experiencing “beatings or physical mistreatment” (MHFW, 2002, p. 79), whereas the 2009 survey showed 39.7% of “ever-married” women experiencing “emotional or physical or sexual violence” (MHFW, 2009, p. 519), which was lowered to 35.4% when “never-married” women were included (MHFW, 2009, p. 504). This difference is the key to analyzing VAW in the Northeast as will be seen below. Regardless of these and other variations, and regardless of the likelihood that all statistics on VAW are underestimates given the reluctance many women to report VAW to researchers (not to mention authorities), VAW in India is widespread. This has produced a growing number of studies that seek to identify the causes of VAW and explain its prevalence.

Literature on VAW in India has focused on spousal violence and familial violence, with some attention to political and communal violence. The causes of VAW are explained as deeply rooted in the ways gender is constructed, reproduced, institutionalized, and internalized in Indian society, a metacultural patriarchy. VAW is attributed to national cultural norms replayed throughout Indian society. There are four main components to this that are closely linked and will be discussed briefly in turn.

The first is patriarchy derived from religious norms. As Panchanadeswaran and Koverola (2005) write, VAW “needs to be placed in the patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal . . . cultural context of India marked by unequal gender relations that are rooted in centuries old religious scriptures” (p. 737). The idea that VAW in India is “age-old” is common (Kaur & Garg, 2008; Sharma, 2005). Authors link this to religious traditions, mostly Hindu. Expectations of chaste and faithful wives, of men being akin to God as husbands and to saviors as sons (Rastogi & Therly, 2006), and of the honor gained by *kanyadaan*, the offering of daughters to another family (Panchanadeswaran & Koverola, 2005), are seen as deeply rooted norms that reinforce patriarchy and provide the socio-cultural conditions in which VAW occurs. Such norms are evident across social, political, and economic life and are institutionalized in the law, the government, and the household (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004). In the VAW literature, this national patriarchy has deeply embedded notions of male ownership over women’s bodies, sexuality, labor, reproductive rights, and autonomy (Sharma, 2005). Thus, women in India only gain power and social acceptance through their participation in patriarchy as daughters, wives, and mothers. This transcends caste, social class, and social mobility. Besides the essentialist nature of much of this literature, there is little detailed discussion of communities practicing minority religions in the VAW literature. There are exceptions, but these are mostly in other literatures on communal violence and social change (Basu, 1998; Chhachhi, 1991; Subramaniam, 2006). If minority religions are included, the focus is usually on Islam and this is rarely seen to disrupt the metacultural patriarchy; rather it merges with it. As Ahmed-Ghosh (2004) points out, “although Hindu precepts do not apply to Muslims in India, a combination of Islamic laws and Hindu cultural edicts bring about similar discriminations for Muslim women in India” (p. 117n).

The second component is dowry. Dowry is seen as the main structure through which VAW is perpetrated (Kelkar, 1985; Menski, 1998; Rastogi & Therly, 2006; van Willigen & Channa, 1991). Dowry refers to the wealth a woman brings to her husband’s family, and it is generally negotiated between the parents of the couple. As Bloch and Rao (2002) point out, it is the ongoing demands and expectations of further payments demanded by the husband and his family throughout the early stages of marriage that lead to violence. The expectations and aspirations associated with dowry are increasing during heightened demand for consumer lifestyles in India (Oldenburg, 2002), recently termed *dowry inflation* (Arunachalam & Logan, 2008). Despite a 1961 law making dowry illegal it is still widely practiced (Rastogi & Therly, 2006), and it has been adopted by some communities who did not previously practice it (Uberoi, 1994). The nonfulfillment of dowry is a major catalyst in VAW, perpetrated by husbands and by members of his family, including other women in the patrilocal household. This has led to conclusions that VAW is far more likely in joint households than in nuclear families (Kaur & Garg, 2009; Panchanadeswaran & Koverola, 2005). Findings suggest that demands for dowry result in VAW from both wealthy families, as they are subjected to higher expectations and the assumption of ongoing capacity to fulfill dowry demands (Bloch & Rao, 2002), and from poorer families, as they find it extremely difficult to meet dowry demands (Srinivasan & Bedi, 2007). However, as Shenk (2007) argues, much of what is attributed to dowry violence in

contemporary India may not be related to dowry at all. Dowry is almost completely absent among the tribal communities of the Northeast.

The third component is dependency in marriage. Marriage in India is virtually universal, and for women, it usually takes place once in their lifetime (MHFW, Kishor, & Gupta, 2009). Divorce carries a major social stigma for women and their families, and thus, women are more likely to remain in abusive marriages, less likely to seek help, and more likely to tolerate abuse (Basu, 2001). Often women who seek support with their natal family find that their parents are anxious to return them to their husbands lest they bring shame on the family and ruin other siblings' marriage prospects (Panchanadeswaran & Koverola, 2005). Many women are aware of this and do not want to place financial and social burdens on their parents and siblings. Furthermore, many women are highly economically dependent on their husbands making it difficult for them to leave abusive marriages (Schuler, Bates, & Islam, 2008). Much of this fear is the product of "economic abuse" derived from patriarchy, which prohibits many women working outside the home or allows husbands to control their wife's earnings when they do work (Vyas, 2006). Few women have property rights (Karanjawala & Chugh, 2009), yet in cases where they do, experiences of VAW are lower (Panda & Agarwal, 2005). Although attitudes toward marriage are similar in the Northeast, women's relative economic empowerment, the prevalence of nuclear families, and greater access to property rights (among some ethnic groups), reduce economic dependency.

The fourth component is caste-based inequality and gendered poverty more broadly. This is not discussed with the same frequency as the above components, though it is becoming more popular (Menon, 2009; Srivastava, 2002). Inequality and poverty are seen as a cause of VAW and as a symptom (Krishnan, 2005). Stratification, particularly caste, is seen to affect VAW by creating and/or intensifying the household conditions and broader social conditions in which VAW occurs (Kapadia, 2002). Often the findings reveal that poorer and lower caste women experience higher levels of VAW, particularly as they experience the repercussions of discrimination and exploitation directly and when experienced by their husbands, much of which is related to high levels of debt, exploitative work conditions, and alcohol abuse (Krishnan, 2005). Yet, as Krishnan (2005) points out, upper-caste women and women from wealthier backgrounds may be less likely to admit to experiencing violence. Furthermore, lower educational and literacy levels among women generally, and particularly women from lower castes, can translate into a high level of dependency on husbands, a greater reluctance to seek help when VAW occurs, and a decreased awareness of rights and laws (Kaur & Garg, 2009). The *National Health and Family Survey* data provide a strong correlation between literacy and higher education levels and a decreased likelihood of VAW (MHFW, 2009). Although communities in the Northeast are not free from inequalities, caste-based stratification and marginalization are not practiced by tribal communities in the hill states and are far less rigid among the plains communities.

Although other components are discussed in the literature, including exposure to VAW in childhood (Martin et al., 2002), the discord between national laws and cultural practices (Karanjawala & Chugh, 2009), and the backlash against women's reservations

in political institutions (Mayaram, 2002), they are invoked far less frequently than the four components discussed above. These components constitute a national culture of violence transcending local variations and creating a pervasive culture in which VAW is widespread and normalized. However, in the Northeast, particularly in the five hill states populated by tribal ethnic minorities, people adhere to divergent religious traditions and cultural practices, and women have some of the highest educational and gender empowerment indicators in the country. Yet VAW is very high and, in many of these states, well above the Indian national average. What explains such high levels of VAW?

The Frontier Exception

The Northeast refers to the area of land between Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. It is almost completely cut off from the rest of India, joined only by a narrow corridor of land between the borders of Nepal and Bangladesh. In the population of around 40 million people, as many as 400 distinct tribal and subtribal groups have been identified, and a large proportion of the population trace their linguistic heritage to the Mon-Khmer and Tibeto-Burman subfamilies of the larger Indo-Chinese linguistic group (Das, 1989). These groups are categorized as *Scheduled Tribes* in India, and make up the majority of the population in five out of eight of the federal states in the region, and large minority populations in the other three states. The region has been characterized by insurgency and counterinsurgency for most of the period following Indian Independence in 1947.

Although India contains diverse regions and a coherent national society is not always identifiable, there is a distance between the Northeast and the rest of India that is qualitatively different from that between other regions in India. Although regions and people throughout India are constructed and viewed differently to each other, and these differences are pronounced and often articulated forcefully at the local level, they still fit into the larger nation, though rarely without difficulties, in ways that the Northeast does not. There is a strong belief in both the Indian “mainland” and in most of the Northeast itself that the different states, autonomous units, and people grouped together as “the Northeast” are not part of India in the same ways as other diverse groups of people. Although this separation is necessary to emphasize the sense of cultural, social, and political alienation between the Northeast and the mainland, it can understate the degree of connectivity between the two. People from the region interact with the mainland in many ways. The national state is responsible for the establishment and maintenance of many of the institutions through which people’s lives are determined, such as the state government and departments, the Sixth Schedule, and the military. Many of the region’s people interact with the state, and in many cases identify with it through holding Indian citizenship, government employment, the national education system, and social and political networks between the Northeast and the rest of India. Despite these links, the separation is pronounced.

Tribal women in the Northeast are perceived to be living under distinct gender relationships and are perceived as being “better off” than women in other parts of India (Barbora &

Fernandes, 2002). Women in the Northeast are seen as more empowered, engaged in more egalitarian social and legal relationships with men, and less constrained by the patriarchal forms of power that dominate the rest of India. These perceptions are propagated by the existence of a comparatively more egalitarian gendered division of labor (Krishna, 1996), adherence to Christianity, indigenous faiths and less rigid forms of Hinduism (Bhaumik, 2004; Singh, 2004; Zote, 2006), visible participation in “male domains” such as sport (Mills, 2006), and by racial stereotypes about tribal women being less bound by conservative traditions and more sexually promiscuous (Baruah, 2006; Kikon, 2009b). Beneath these perceptions are strong patriarchal relations, though these are formed through different traditions than those in other parts of India. This will be discussed below.

Women in the Northeast rank highly on a number of indicators that are seen in the VAW literature to lower the risks of violence. Illiteracy for women in India is 58.2%; all female illiteracy rates in the Northeast are below this, and in the hill states female literacy rates are among the highest in India (MHFW, 2002). In Mizoram, the literacy rate for women aged 15 to 49 is 94.0% and is higher than that of men (MHFW et al., 2009). Women in all Northeast states get married later than women elsewhere in India (MHFW, 2002). Indicators for employment for women are also well above the national average in the hill states, though the proportion of these women who are paid cash for their work is lower than the national average in these same states, suggesting much of this work is agricultural labor on family plots (MHFW, 2009), but the overall proportion of women in paid employment is higher than the rest of India. In all states in the Northeast except Tripura, the percentage of women participating in household decision making³ is far above the national average, and it is almost double the national average in Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland (MHFW, 2009). The majority of families in the hill states are nuclear, which is in contrast to other parts of India where joint families are seen as “fertile ground” for VAW, especially dowry-related VAW (Panchanadeswaran & Koverola, 2005, p. 744). Throughout the Northeast, the sex preference ratio is more balanced than the national average; in other words, preference for more male children than female children is lower and preference for more female than male children is higher (MHFW, 2002). There is a range of other statistics that could be cited here to make the same point, namely, the overall trend across a range of different indicators demonstrates that women in the Northeast live in a very different gendered context than women in other parts of India. Thus, consideration of gender needs to go beyond national level analysis in understanding situated intersections.

Despite containing few of the characteristics that make up the national culture of violence in India, and despite having some of the best gender indicators in India, VAW in the Northeast is widespread. Recognizing that statistics on VAW are likely to be vast underestimates they do provide helpful comparisons with other parts of India. Again, using the last two *National Family and Health Survey*’s the following statistics are striking. In the 2002 *National Family and Health Survey*, which, as noted above, not only limited results to domestic violence but also included experiences of violence beyond the household, the percentages of women in the Northeast experiencing VAW were above the national average or marginally below. Compared with the national average of 21.0%,

31.1% of women in Meghalaya experienced VAW, which was *second highest* rate in all of India (MHFW, 2002). The levels recorded in the other hill states were 26.4% in Arunachal Pradesh, 19.7% in Manipur, 20.1% in Mizoram, and 19.0% in Nagaland (MHFW, 2002). What is even more striking is that the survey also recorded the perpetrators of the violence. In Meghalaya, almost 9 out of 10 women experiencing VAW were victimized outside the family. In Mizoram, it was 5 in 10, and in Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland the ratio was 4 in 10 (MHFW, 2002). The ratio was also above the national average in Manipur and Sikkim. This is dramatically different from the rest of India where 89.5% of VAW is perpetrated by husbands, which increases to 98% if in-laws and other family members are included (MHFW, 2002).

It is important to note that in the 2009 survey the definition of violence was expanded to include emotional, sexual, and physical violence, but the focus was on violence by spouses and household members. In this survey, levels of physical violence and correlated physical, sexual, and emotional violence in the Northeast states were lower and much closer to the national average of 37.5% and 39.7%, respectively. The difference is spectacular in certain cases. Meghalaya went from having the second highest rates of VAW in India in 2002 to tying for second lowest in 2009 (MHFW et al., 2009). The other hill states were also below the national average (with the exception of Arunachal Pradesh) after being above in 2002 (MHFW et al., 2009). Thus, while not to deny the very real and severe frequency of spousal and familial violence in the Northeast states, the context in which VAW is occurring is significantly different from the context in other parts of India. VAW is being experienced with more, or comparable, frequency outside the family. This will be examined in the following section.

The Frontier Culture of Violence

VAW in the Northeast takes place in a frontier culture of violence. This term designates a culture of violence that is considerably different from the national culture discussed in the VAW literature and locates this culture in the specific political, social, and economic circumstances of the Northeast frontier. Within the frontier culture of violence are two spatial contexts: the external nonfamilial context, where VAW is perpetrated outside the household, and the internal familial context that focuses on VAW in the household. These contexts are separated analytically, but in reality the distinction is blurred.

In the Northeast, the proportion of VAW perpetrated by persons outside the household is the highest in India and multiple times higher than the national average. The most crucial component of this is the wholesale militarization of the region. Militarization comes from the Indian Armed Forces and paramilitary groups (hereafter, armed forces) and local militant groups primarily organized along ethnic lines. The presence of large numbers of armed men directly causes VAW as scores of cases of murder, rape, molestation, and sexual harassment by members of the armed forces and militant groups attest. This presence indirectly causes VAW by propagating a frontier culture where violence is routine, frequently witnessed, and normalized. In this culture, VAW in public and in the household is widespread and the distinction between the two is continually

collapsed. This frontier culture of violence is not the sole determinant of VAW in the Northeast, yet it structures a subnational context that is pervasive and has deepened over five decades. The armed forces and a number of paramilitary forces are present throughout the Northeast. While present in parts of the region during the colonial era, large deployments of armed forces personnel for counterinsurgency operations in the period after Indian Independence in 1947 and following the Sino-Indian War of 1962 have steadily increased their numbers. In recent decades, the armed forces have come to symbolize an occupying force for the people of the region. Armed personnel are encountered on the roads, in towns, in villages, and in markets. Military cantonments and bases occupy town centers, strategic hills, bridges, and border crossings. Members of the armed forces frequently stop vehicles to search passengers and cargo. Checkpoints are numerous, heavily curtailing movement.

Members of the armed forces deployed in the region are protected by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 (AFSPA). The AFSPA allows “any commissioned officer, warrant officer, noncommissioned officer or any other person of equivalent rank in the armed forces” to fire “even to the causing of death” on any person acting in contravention of any law or order, any person carrying weapons or anything capable of being used as a weapon, and to prohibit the assembly of more than five people (Ministry of Home Affairs [MHA], 1958/1998, p. S4a). It allows armed forces personnel to arrest without warrant and with any necessary force “any person who has committed a cognizable offence or against whom a reasonable suspicion exists that he [*sic*] has committed or is about to commit a cognizable offence” (MHA, 1958/1998, p. S4c). It allows armed forces personnel to enter and search any premises without a warrant to “make any such arrest” (MHA, 1958/1998, p. S4d). The most significant part is Section 6, which states,

No prosecution, suit or other legal proceeding shall be instituted, except with the previous sanction of the Central Government, against any person in respect of anything done or purported to be done in exercise of the powers conferred by this Act. (MHA, 1958/1998, p. S6)

Over the last 50 years, the AFSPA has been applied to any area declared “disturbed” by the Indian Government. Designating an area “disturbed” must be reviewed every 6 months, yet there is no limit on the number of times this designation can be renewed, effectively meaning some areas can, and have been, classified as “disturbed” for decades. The designation “disturbed” is not open to judicial review, nor can it be contested by state governments (South Asian Human Rights Documentation Centre [SAHRDC], 1995), let alone local governments in the said area or concerned civil society actors. As of 2009 the only states with no “disturbed areas” are Sikkim, only recently included and administered as part of Northeast India, and Mizoram.⁴

Murder, rape, beatings, and sexual harassment by the armed forces in the Northeast have been well documented in a number of international and national human rights reports (Asian Centre for Human Rights [ACHR], 2008a, 2008b; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2008), and by women’s organizations, activists, and human rights groups in the region

itself. The bulk of this material highlights individual cases rather than an overall data set. Rape by armed forces personnel has been widely documented and this includes rape after forced entry into homes, rape at gunpoint, rape of women in captivity arrested on suspicion of links with insurgents, rape of school-aged girls on their way to or from school, and the abduction and subsequent rape of women and girls from their homes, including gang rape. In many cases, women have been raped in front of family members, including children, who were held at gunpoint by other members of the armed forces. In other cases, victims of rape have died after sustaining injuries during attacks. Physical violence also occurs, particularly when women intervene when armed forces personnel attack family members or friends (compiled from ACHR, 2008a, 2008b; Goswami, Sreekala, & Goswami, 2005; HRW, 2008; Hussain, 2006).

Women's bodies have become the territory on which this culture of violence is marked. In their study of women in armed violence in the Northeast, Goswami et al. (2005) argue that it is "the perceived honor of the enemy that is the target in sexually violating their women" (p. 37). In a clear example of this, in one of the cases related in their study, a woman was raped by two armed forces personnel in the kitchen of her home while the rest of the village were assembled under gunpoint outside in an alleged search for insurgents. After raping the woman, one of the armed forces personnel threw a 10 rupee (20 US cents) note at her (p. 40). Race and gender intersect in harassment and violence directed toward tribal women, particularly by nontribal members of the armed forces. Thus, tribal women are not just "women of the enemy," but also perceived to be less bound by moral codes that apply to women in other parts of India. Rape followed by a humiliating offer of payment exemplifies this highly racialized aspect of VAW in the region. It is here that the relational aspects of race and ethnicity that are crucial to intersectionality can be seen. The sexuality and morality of Northeast women is drawn from their ethnic differentiation from the Indian mainstream and their membership in a suspect and exceptional population.

Crucial to all of these incidents is the fact that the perpetrators are protected under the AFSPA. The AFSPA provides *de jure* impunity in that members of the armed forces are not prosecuted in civilian courts, and under the provisions of the act VAW is not deemed criminal. As HRW (2008) reports, the AFSPA also provides a form of *de facto* impunity as military courts responsible for prosecuting soldiers have often failed to investigate violations or been "simply unwilling" to bring charges against military personnel (p. 18). In certain cases, the armed forces have lodged counterclaims against women accusing them of trying to defame the army (Goswami et al., 2005). Despite a 1997 amendment to the AFSPA that any person arrested under the act must be handed over to civilian authorities within 24 hr, this is frequently ignored (ACHR, 2008b). Persons arrested have been detained for periods ranging from 1 week to several months. These periods of detention have facilitated torture, rape, and murder by the armed forces, including rape and torture of children (ACHR, 2008b).

The persistence of the AFSPA epitomizes the tacit acceptance of systematic violence as a necessary by-product of securing an unruly border region and policing a suspect population (Kikon, 2009a). The region is constructed externally and internally as an exception to norms and laws upheld in other parts of India (McDuie-Ra, 2009b). Military

occupation, the creation of federal states, centrally directed development and resource extraction, the provision for reservations for people in the region to study and work in other parts of India, are all part of the ongoing process of making a legible state in the Northeast, creating a permanent state of exception. Far from assuring legibility, the militarization of the region has fragmented state making to severe degrees of disorder (see Hansen & Stepputat, 2001).

Furthermore, VAW is perpetrated not only by the “occupying” armed forces but also by the local law enforcement agencies. While this also takes place in other parts of India and the world, in the frontier culture of violence VAW by law enforcement agencies is more possible and less extraordinary when it occurs. This is not restricted to “disturbed” areas. The states of the Northeast have very high ratios of police per capita. Compared to a national average of 1,360 police per 1 million persons, all states in the Northeast have much higher ratios. In some Northeast states, the ratios are multiple times higher: Nagaland has 9,500 police per 1 million persons; Mizoram, 7,250; Sikkim, 6,230; Manipur, 5,930 (Government of India [GoI], 2002). The proximity to international borders means additional security personnel are constantly on the move throughout the region. Despite being bound by different laws from the AFSPA, law enforcement agencies operate in the culture of impunity created by the AFSPA and a militarized society. As Chenoy (2002) argues, in this environment “the very sight of men in uniform is traumatizing” (p. 133).

The frontier culture of violence is not simply a product of the armed forces and the AFSPA; it is enhanced and reproduced by ethno-nationalist militant groups. Given the ethnic diversity of the Northeast, the small populations of many of the region’s ethnic groups when compared to other groups in India, and the historical and contemporary struggles required to achieve rights and political autonomy, it is unsurprising that ethno-nationalism is salient and shapes the ways people in the region view the rest of India, migrants to the Northeast, and other tribal groups living in the region (Baruah, 2006). Ethno-nationalism is not always manifested in insurgency and violence. It has also underpinned powerful social movements that have made vital gains for ethnic minority cultural rights, land rights, and social justice. Similarly, armed violence has not always been carried out in the pursuit of ethno-nationalist ends; extortion, smuggling, trafficking, control of natural resources, and political power have all taken on armed dimensions in the region (Dai, 2007; Das, 2007; Lacina, 2007). Importantly, militant groups do not always receive widespread popular support from the communities they claim to represent. Again, this is not uniform; in some parts of the region militant groups enjoy deep community support and legitimacy, while in others they are viewed as an antisocial element involved in organized crime and extortion. Regardless of motivations and support the number of armed militant groups has increased dramatically over the last 50 years to between 100 and 120 (Baruah, 2005).

Militant groups also perpetrate VAW, particularly in internecine violence. Cases that have been documented include those of women experiencing violence by militants from rival communities and from their own communities (Hussain, 2006). Particularly vulnerable are women and children in internally displaced persons’ camps, which are spread throughout the Northeast (Das, 2008a). In this environment women’s experiences of VAW go beyond incidents of violence to which they are personally subjected. Goswami et al.

(2005) identify six “categories” of women affected: women relatives of armed activists, women relatives of state armed forces, women militants or combatants, women as shelter providers, women as victims of sexual and physical abuse, woman as peace negotiators, women as rights activists (p. 19). It is also conceivable that many women fulfill multiple categories in their varied roles inside and outside the household.

In understanding the prevalence of VAW in the Northeast it is important not to over-determine the role of the armed forces and militant groups. Although militarized, everyday life in the Northeast is not constantly violent. The internal familial context is also important. The unwavering perception of women’s elevated position in the Northeast, a perception common both within and outside the region, hides heterogeneous forms of patriarchy. Patriarchy is evolving as customary practices are reshaped by modern legal and social norms, yet subordination remains widespread. Despite the involvement of women in agricultural production, paid employment, and household decision making, women are still excluded from formal decision making institutions (Barbora & Fernandes, 2002).⁵ In other parts of India, village- and district-level institutions have one third of the seats reserved for women under the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution. The extension of this to the Northeast states has been staunchly resisted on the ground that it is against tradition (Krishna, 2004; McDuire-Ra, 2007; Nongbri, 2003). Exclusion extends to state-level “modern” politics, where the number of women representatives in the Northeast states is the *lowest* in India (United Nation Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2001). In many parts of the Northeast, patriarchy is growing stronger as societies undergo rapid social and economic change (Barbora & Fernandes, 2002; Kikon, 2002; Nongbri, 2008; Zehol, 1998). The point to note is that the foundations and structures of patriarchy are fundamentally different from the metacultural patriarchy discussed in the VAW literature, yet despite the perceptions of elevated status for women, patriarchy is a reality of the internal familial context in the region.

In this frontier culture of violence VAW emanates from the continued interplay between the external nonfamilial context and the internal familial context. In this environment, violence is constitutive of public and private spaces. Pandey (2006) refers to this as “routine violence” (p. 8), that is, violence not merely in its spectacular forms but also in its disguised forms, normalized and widespread. As Goswami et al. (2005) argue, in a militarized society, even in locations where actual armed violence is minimal, VAW is far higher than in non-militarized societies. Gill (2006) refers to this as “violence on three fronts,” namely, violence experienced by women from the state, from militants, and “a corresponding escalation of violence in their homes” (p. 215).

Beyond the direct physical and sexual violence experienced in the Northeast, the psychological aspects of violence are an important part of this interplay. Murder, rape, and torture by the armed forces and by militant groups impute a deep sense of fear and insecurity in everyday life. This shapes the choices women make about their own mobility and those of their family members, and the choices family members impose on women, which has lasting consequences when mobility is necessary for health care, employment, livelihoods, and education (Gill, 2006), and to escape abuse. Mobility usually always requires interactions with armed personnel, perpetuating the fear that each search, each routine

questioning, each suspicion could escalate into violence or detention, and under the protection of the AFSPA there is no way to prevent this happening or to seek justice when it does. Fear of the armed forces, and also militants, is not restricted to women's interactions in public. The AFSPA enables the search of any premises without a warrant. For many women, the household provides no shelter from violence and intimidation.

The frontier culture of violence also affects men, particularly young men from the hill states and other hill areas. Young men are racially profiled as insurgents by the military and are the targets of recruitment by insurgents. They are subject to pressures and harassment from both sides. Movement, employment, education, and social networks are all jeopardized in this environment. Young men who move in groups attract high levels of suspicion and harassment, yet young men who move around on their own are far more vulnerable to harassment and without a companion it can be difficult to trace individuals when disappearances occur. The psychological impact militarization has on young men is rarely examined beyond being a catalyst to join militant groups or the armed forces. Attention is mostly given to combatants, with little attention given to the impacts of militarization on noncombatants, particularly the long-term psychological impacts of living in this environment—impacts that get taken home daily. There is little consideration of the nature of masculinity in this environment. Rehabilitation of former militants is almost entirely focused on vocational training and cash incentives, with no resources or consideration of psychological support (Farrelly, 2009). Thus, women exist in an environment dominated by the nationalist-infused masculinity of the occupying military, the ethno-nationalist masculinity of insurgency and gun culture, and the obligatory masculinity of tribal men more broadly who frequently claim women as property of the ethnic group in the broader ethno-nationalist struggle.

Data that demonstrate the interplay between external nonfamilial contexts and internal familial contexts are scarce and difficult to generate given the personal and psychological nature of the interplay. Beyond the VAW statistics discussed in the previous section there are few ways to draw clear-cut links between the “three fronts” of VAW. However, there are attitudinal statistics that offer some guidance. As Flood and Pease (2009) have found, such attitudes shape the perpetration of VAW and the responses of women experiencing VAW as well as those around them. Studies from other parts of India have emphasized the links between witnessing VAW in childhood and perpetrating and accepting VAW in adult life (Martin et al., 2002; Panda & Agarwal, 2005). These studies have been made in the context of familial violence, yet in the context of the Northeast the principle could be extended to the interplay between nonfamilial and familial contexts. In the Northeast violence is experienced in such a routine manner that its impact on perceptions of VAW should not be underestimated.

The 2009 *National Family and Health Survey* provides details about attitudes of both men and women toward VAW. Men and women were asked whether they agreed with any of the following reasons as justification for a husband beating his wife:

she goes out without telling him, she neglects the house or children, she argues with him, she refuses to have sexual intercourse with him, she doesn't cook food

properly, he suspects she is unfaithful, and she shows disrespect for in-laws. (MHFW, 2009, p. 474)

The percentage who agreed with at least one of the reasons is very high in the Northeast, particularly among women and men in Manipur (89.7% of women and 85% of men), Mizoram (83.0% of women and 82.6% of men), and Nagaland (78.9% of women and 71.2% of men). It is unlikely to be merely coincidental that these states have faced the worst excesses of militarization over the last five decades. In all the other hill states the percentage agreeing with at least one of the justifications for wife beating is well above the national average of 54.4% of women and 51.0% of men (MHFW, 2009). This is not to suggest that such attitudes are wholly shaped by militarism. That is to say, it is not as if prior to the occupation by the armed forces and the growth in militancy all of the ethnic groups in the region had vastly different attitudes toward gender relations that have now been brutalized, tempting as such a reading may be. Yet it would also be difficult to argue that there is no link between militarization, high levels of VAW, and individual acceptance of VAW. Given the enormous differential to the national average, the normalization of violence means that a degree of interplay cannot be dismissed or overlooked. In an environment where violence is routine, the nonfamilial and familial causes of VAW are mutually constitutive and threaded into what Nordstrom (2004) calls “the fabric of everyday life” (p. 68). It is in this social environment that women’s movements have contested the causes of VAW, the focus of the following section.

Contesting VAW in the Frontier

Moser and Clark (2001) argue that women are not simply caught in the middle of opposing armed factions in militarized societies but are also agents in these same environments. As Kandiyoti (1988) has famously argued, women strategize and bargain with patriarchy “within a set of concrete constraints” (p. 275). Ray (1999) has taken this further, introducing the concept of a “field,” defined as “a structured, unequal, and socially constructed environment *within* which organizations are embedded and *to* which organizations and activists constantly respond” (p. 6). In the Northeast, the fields within which women’s organizations and activists are embedded include the frontier culture of violence and different localized tribal and ethnic cultures beneath, each with their own gendered norms.

Collective agency contesting VAW has been undertaken by a range of diverse organizations and activists, termed *movements* here to denote both the ongoing role played by established organizations and the collaborative networks that form during periods of intense contestation, and “organizations” when specific actors are being discussed. Women’s movements in the Northeast have contested both the external nonfamilial context of VAW and the internal familial context of VAW. In most cases they have been more successful in contesting the external context, particularly VAW carried out by the armed forces, and less successful in contesting internal causes, particularly when this involves speaking out against a designated tribal or ethnic community.

In contesting VAW perpetrated by the armed forces and the protection afforded by the AFSPA, women's movements have been able to bring VAW in the Northeast onto regional and national political agendas. Contesting the AFSPA has widespread support from other civil society actors in the Northeast and from a public weary of violence, particularly in the states experiencing the worst excesses of the armed forces (Bannerjee, 2008a). This has been most evident in Manipur, where the women's movement has campaigned against the AFSPA for over 30 years, led by the Meira Paibis (torch-bearing women). The Meira Paibis have held nightlong vigils in the state capital, Imphal, whenever there is a rape, murder, or disappearance at the hands of the armed forces (Devi, 1998; Veda, 2005). They were instrumental in bringing VAW *by the armed forces* to national attention after 40 of their members, mostly middle-aged women, protested naked in front of the Kangla Fort where the Assam Rifles paramilitary force was stationed in July 2004 after the rape and murder of a 32-year-old Manipuri woman, Thangjam Manorama (hereafter Manorama; Gaikwad, 2009; McDuie-Ra, 2005; Vajpeyi, 2009). A few days before the protest a group of armed forces personnel entered Manorama's house in the state capital, Imphal, and arrested her on the premise that she was an explosives expert with the People's Liberation Army, the oldest insurgent group in Manipur. They beat her outside the house for 3 hr while the rest of the family was locked inside the house and then took her away. The following afternoon her body was found naked and bullet-ridden by a roadside. It was difficult for doctors to determine whether she had been raped given the number of bullets in her body. As Gaikwad (2009) writes, "her death bore testimony of the most visceral kind, to the unwavering brutality of the security forces" (p. 304). The case of Manorama was the catalyst for massive protests against the armed forces, including the much publicized naked protest. The women who entered the army barracks held up banners that read "Indian Army Rape Us" and "Indian Army Take Our Flesh" (Gaikwad, 2009, p. 306; McDuie-Ra, 2005, p. 57; Vajpeyi, 2009, p. 27). The protests brought national attention to abuses by the armed forces in Manipur and it was a catalyst for other civil society actors to pressure the state and central governments to remove the AFSPA, culminating in the establishment of the high-level Reddy Commission to review the AFSPA and the withdrawal of armed forces from the Kangla Fort in Imphal (Chasie & Hazarika, 2009).

While the women's movement in Manipur is diverse it has become most well known for its role in protesting against the AFSPA. This has meant that the external and internal causes of VAW have become channeled into a singular target, the armed forces. At the local level, patriarchy is firmly intact, militant groups continue to fracture society, and women are excluded from most forms of local political participation (Veda, 2005). VAW is high and attitudes toward VAW in Manipur demonstrate that the success in opposing the armed forces has not translated into a major shift in patriarchal attitudes within the local "field." As Brara (2002) argues, the women's movement in Manipur is "of" the women but not "for" the women (p. 195). If the AFSPA is eventually repealed it will be difficult for the women's movement to disaggregate VAW from the broader struggle against the armed forces. Being an instrumental part of a larger movement against the AFSPA may have provided opportunities for the women's movement to contest and expose VAW, yet it also places limits on the ways VAW is contested.

Furthermore, ethnic divisions have been replicated in the women's movement in Manipur. Tensions and violence between Meiteis of the Imphal valley, Naga communities in the hills to the north and Kuki communities to the south have fragmented Manipuri society (Parratt & Parratt, 2003). Naga women's groups working in the hill areas against VAW have few avenues of communication with groups in other parts of Manipur or other parts of India due to their remote location and tensions between Meitei and Naga communities impairing cooperation (Bannerjee, 2008a; Goswami et al., 2005). Kuki women's groups have been restricted to hill areas in the south of the state where lack of infrastructure and the high number of militant groups have reduced their ability to network with other women's groups (Veda, 2005).

This demonstrates the bind for women's movements in the Northeast. They are contesting VAW on what Gaikwad (2009) refers to as "unstable ground," where it becomes difficult to pinpoint the "wrongdoers" (p. 300). While contestation of VAW by the armed forces has been successful, there are also instances of women's movements contesting militant groups from their own communities. Organizations such as the Bodo Women's Justice Forum, the Naga Women's Association, and the Naga Women's Union of Manipur have spoken out against shootings, campaigned for peace at the local level, and also participated in peace negotiations between different armed factions and with the government (Bannerjee, 2008a, 2008b; Das, 2008b; Chenoy, 2002; Gill, 2006). Participation has been successful in giving women a voice, yet it has also drawn women's organizations deeper into ethnic politics. Women's organizations have been co-opted into ethnic politics in some local circumstances, but they have *chosen* to participate in ethnic politics in others, and in some contexts they have challenged VAW from an autonomous position. In targeting the armed forces and militant groups, women's movements have framed VAW as part of a larger social ill, something attached to the fragmentation of society. VAW is cast in the shadow of militarization, a product of the external nonfamilial context rather than the internal familial context.

VAW within the internal familial context is much more difficult to contest. The case of women's organizations in the state of Meghalaya demonstrates this. Women's organizations in Meghalaya have contested the causes of VAW from within Garo and Khasi society, the two main tribal groups in the state. Women's organizations have consciously framed VAW as something caused by members of the tribal community. Rallies against VAW in 2003 and 2004 brought women (and men) from different ethnic communities together and called on the society to take responsibility for VAW (McDuie-Ra, 2007). In this period women's organizations made demands on the state government to set up a state-level women's commission to report to the National Commission for Women. Such state-level commissions existed in others parts of India but had not yet been established in Meghalaya. After a yearlong delay a commission was created on the eve of a visit by the National Women's Commission and was stacked with hand-picked appointees by the state government. Members of the women's movement that had protested vocally against VAW were excluded and the commission was later made a government department leaving it wholly de-politicized and completely co-opted (McDuie-Ra, 2009a).

The movement in Meghalaya faced two considerable constraints particular to the Northeast. First, contesting familial causes of VAW is a sensitive exercise as it exposes

gender relations within the different ethnic groups of the Northeast and subjects traditions to critical scrutiny (Kikon, 2002; Krishna, 2004; Nongbri, 2003). This occurs in a context where ethnic identity is heightened by ethno-nationalism, and traditions of ethnic and tribal groups are celebrated and defended, not criticized and altered. Furthermore, contesting internal familial causes of VAW is difficult in the face of the myth of the empowered tribal woman. This makes it very difficult for women's organizations to identify and frame the patriarchal relationships they are contesting. This not only distorts gender relationships at the local level but further isolates women's organizations and activists from networks in other parts of India. This is even more difficult for women's organizations from matrilineal ethnic groups, as is the case with the Garo and Khasi, as the perception of female domination makes patriarchy hard to critique (Nongbri, 2008).

Second, state intrusion distorts the contestation of VAW. Under the AFSPA, assembly of more than five people in disturbed areas is banned. This makes protests, rallies, and civic participation very difficult. The state monitors civil society closely, perpetually on the lookout for links with insurgents. Even in areas not declared disturbed, any association or suspected association with insurgent groups can mean blacklisting or banning, and organizations must comply with arduous registration requirements to remain legitimate in the eyes of the state and continue to receive funds from donors or other supporters (McDuie-Ra, 2006). For women's movements, this has resulted in cooption into government departments on one hand and so-called NGO-ization on the other (Alvarez, 2009). While this has enabled input into social policy in many parts of the region, it has provided few opportunities to contest either external or internal contexts of VAW. As political power lies within traditional governance institutions and ethno-nationalist actors rather than the NGO sector or government departments, women's organizations must contend with being legitimate but marginalized in largely de-politicized spaces. This leaves women's organizations on delicate ground. They are both dependent on the state to address VAW, but clearly at risk of cooption in these engagements. They are members of the same communities that are pursuing ethno-nationalist struggles, while simultaneously having their political capital coveted by these same organizations, giving few possibilities to contest VAW within their own communities.

Conclusion

National cultures of violence underpinned by a homogeneous patriarchy may make global comparisons of VAW easier, but they are of limited use in explaining VAW in subnational contexts where the national culture has little purchase. Few of the explanations of VAW in other parts of India apply in the Northeast, and many of the factors believed to reduce the risks of VAW are present and prevalent. Yet VAW is widespread. In the Northeast, the frontier culture of violence has far more impact on the ways VAW is perpetrated, experienced, and contested as it structures the environment in which women and men carry out their everyday lives. Violence is witnessed in the home and outside it—in the streets, on the roadsides, in the markets, in the barracks, in the fields, and in the trees. Accordingly, VAW is experienced in the home and outside it, collapsing

distinctions between public and private spheres that cordon off household violence from societal violence. Race and gender intersect in the tense relationship between occupying forces and tribal women, between rival ethnic and tribal communities, and in determining which perpetrators of VAW are acceptable to challenge. In looking beyond national frames of reference in analyzing VAW, it is crucial to adopt an intersectional approach to deeply analyze regional spaces, which in the case of the Northeast have constructed the legal, political, and cultural grounds on which VAW occurs and limits the extent to which it is addressed. Although the Northeast is unique in the Indian context, it has similarities to other frontier areas and borderlands throughout the world, where militarization and marginality coexist in a permanently fragile milieu.

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Notes

1. Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland.
2. North India minus the Northeast.
3. Surveyed through four categories of decision making: decisions about own health care, major purchases, household purchases, and visits to family and friends (MHFW, 2009, p. 467).
4. Mizoram was a “disturbed” area for 19 years before peace accords with the Indian government in 1986.
5. Scheduled Tribes are under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which legislates for “traditional” village governance and amalgamated apex bodies at the district level. Parliamentary state legislatures also operate in tandem in each state.

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